

## **The Chronicle of Higher Education**

May 6, 2009

### **House Panel Backs Increased Aid to Adult-Education Programs**

By MEGAN ECKSTEIN

College officials and adult students, including a well-known country singer, argued for increases in federal funds for job training and adult education in a Congressional hearing on Tuesday. And the lawmakers appeared sympathetic to their pleas.

A House of Representatives education subcommittee held the session as Congress prepares to renew the Workforce Investment Act, which governs job-training grants to colleges. Members of the panel asked both the educators and the students how to improve the adult-education system. Almost all of the legislators present acknowledged that Congress would need to commit substantially more money to fix the problem of adult illiteracy.

Federal appropriations for adult education under the act have declined over the past five years, and federally financed programs last year served only 2.3 million of the estimated 93 million people who are not literate enough to enroll in higher education or job-training programs, said Rubén Hinojosa, a Texas Democrat who is chairman of the House Subcommittee on Higher Education, Lifelong Learning, and Competitiveness.

"Our challenge for the reauthorization of the Workforce Investment Act is to develop innovative models that will significantly expand our capacity to deliver adult education," he said. "We need a targeted and focused strategy to build a bridge to postsecondary education, advanced training, and a better quality of life for adults."

#### **'Everything We Can'**

Tuesday's hearing was the subcommittee's fourth in a series focused on issues related to the Workforce Investment Act. Legislation to reauthorize the law has languished for several years, but Democrats have said they want to renew it soon.

"We will do everything we can to raise the appropriations," said Mr. Hinojosa, reflecting the sentiment of most of the other subcommittee members present at the hearing.

The witnesses—who included a representative of the Washington State Board for Community and Technical Colleges; two college administrators and a professor; and the recording star Gretchen Wilson, 35, who earned her GED last May after dropping out of high school in the ninth grade—agreed that, beyond providing more money for literacy and job-training programs, Congress should find ways to use technology to make adult education more efficient, improve federal data collection to better track adult students' success during and after their courses, and revamp programs to make them more applicable to work-force demands.

Martin Finsterbusch, executive director of Voice of Adult Learners United to Educate, an advocacy group that seeks to help adults with low literacy skills, told the subcommittee that he had struggled for 10 years in a community college before earning an associate degree. He described a major disconnect between what adult-education programs teach—math, reading, writing—and what adults actually want to learn, like how to balance a checkbook, fill out employment forms, and perform manual skills they can use in jobs.

### **Better Use of Technology**

The witnesses and the lawmakers themselves talked extensively about how Congress might increase distance learning to help more people gain access to GED-preparation programs and job training on the Internet, particularly because so many adults balance the demands of family and work, without enough time to attend hours of class in person each week.

Mr. Finsterbusch also asked that Congress not overlook lesser-known but innovative technologies, particularly ones that would benefit individuals with learning disabilities and limited English skills.

For instance, he said, Congress should encourage colleges and others to use tools like scanning pens, some of which can not only record pages but also read them back aloud, and cellphones that can process speech and either translate it into another language or produce a typed version, to help speed literacy training among adults who are learning English as a second language.

Technology alone does not hold all the answers to problems facing adult learners, said Donna Kinerney, an instructional dean at Montgomery College, in Maryland, whose program offers life skills, literacy, and civics courses to students who are learning English as a second language, as well as basic education courses for adults.

Ms. Kinerney told the panel that her program desperately needed more qualified teachers, whose training she asked lawmakers to finance. She suggested that Congress create a research center to help determine how to best teach adults with varying levels of education in their own native languages.

Many members of the subcommittee suggested that they would almost certainly support increases in spending for adult education. They sought the witnesses' advice on where the money would be best used. Rep. Robert E. Andrews, a Democrat of New Jersey, said adult education was one of the best uses of federal money, since every dollar spent would be repaid several times over when the beneficiaries began earning higher salaries and paying more in income and sales taxes.

"I'm very interested in doing whatever we can to increase distance learning," he said.

The crowded hearing room erupted into applause when Rep. Phil Roe, a Republican of Tennessee, pledged his support for adult education and said, "We have a No Child Left Behind program, but what we need is a No Adult Left Behind program."

